

The Sexual Abuse Crisis: What Have We Learned? A Response to Archbishop Harry J. Flynn

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SUMMARY. This essay is a direct response to Archbishop Harry J. Flynn's keynote at the Symposium "Trusting the Clergy: The churches and communities come to grips with sexual misconduct." It focuses on what we know about abusers and their victims. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Clergy sexual abuse, Roman Catholic sex abuse crisis

I come to this discussion as a psychologist and as a person raised in the Jewish tradition. I was first introduced to the reality of child sexual abuse in the church in a very unusual way. It was during the early 1970s when I was an intern in clinical child psychology in Boston. I had a close colleague who told me in the coffee room one day that he had been a priest, and had left the priesthood. I knew he was a devout Catholic, and asked, "Michael, why did you leave the priesthood?" He replied, "Well, I

[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "The Sexual Abuse Crisis: What Have We Learned? A Response to Archbishop Harry J. Flynn." Newberger, Carolyn Moore. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Religion & Abuse* (The Haworth Pastoral Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 5, No. 3, 2003, pp. 35-41; and: *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: Trusting the Clergy?* (ed: Marie M. Fortune, and W. Merle Longwood) The Haworth Pastoral Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003, pp. 35-41. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: docdelivery@haworthpress.com].

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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J1154v05n03_06

was assigned to a large city institution that took in boys from the streets, and I discovered that these boys were being taken in and were being molested by the members of the clergy and by the director of this institution. I couldn't reconcile that with my values and beliefs as a Catholic and as a priest. I had to go. I couldn't deal with it. I had to leave." And so, there's another fallout from these issues, which is the good men the churches have lost who otherwise would have been fine priests, as my friend Michael alternatively became a wonderful social worker in the lay world.

But why didn't I ask, "Michael, why didn't you tell someone?" I didn't ask Michael because in 1972 I didn't think to ask, and Michael, to my knowledge, didn't tell anyone in the church either.

This story can be seen as an indicator both of Michael's context and the culture in which he was embedded as a priest, where he couldn't or wouldn't tell, and also of the times. I was a young psychologist, just a few years from my degree. I was learning about children and adults, and mental illness and health, but I wasn't learning what I needed to ask, "Why didn't you tell?" But now I feel that there has been a process of growth, and development, of discovery and recognition.

In my comments I will try to give some sense of where I think the church and all of us need to go at this point. In his presentation, Archbishop Harry J. Flynn talked about looking through the eyes of the victims and the parents. I think he is right on target with that kind of expansion of the framework. As the Reverend Marie Fortune indicated, the church's institutional agenda is just not an adequate framework for understanding the problems you face or their solutions.

I would also argue that it is important to look through the eyes of abusers. Otherwise, you would have an imperfect sense of what you need to know to protect yourselves and the children that depend on you. Let us begin by looking at the world from the perspective of one who sexually abuses children. First, relinquish the idea that they look different from you or me. Anyone could molest children. They are often very nice people. "Niceness" is the best mask for an abuser to wear (De Becker, 1997, p. 56).

The majority of child sexual abusers are male. Most have fantasies about sex with children, and their inner lives are preoccupied with children. In fact, they become accomplished at living double lives. If they didn't, they couldn't trap children. If their motives were evident, they couldn't gain contact with children and acquire access to children, and enforce secrecy in their conduct of sex. These men are usually compulsively driven to have sex with children, and some, though not all, are sadistic and/or psychopathic. But they don't look it (Salter, 2003, p. 31)!

The church is an ideal setting for people who want access to children in order to prey on them. It is a community of trusting people, as are most communities of faith. These are communities in which our natural inclination is to trust in each other's goodness, good will, and shared values. For that reason, our guard is down and we don't recognize someone in our midst who might hurt our children.

The Catholic Church is also ideal because of the cover of celibacy. Does celibacy cause sexual abuse? I doubt it. But does an institution that is celibate provide a cover for someone who otherwise would not be interested in adult consensual sex? Absolutely.

The priesthood also provides authority and legitimacy. As a consequence, you have to assume that people who want access to children—people who seek opportunity, secrecy, and power and credibility with children in order to groom them for sexual relationships—will enter the priesthood.

In order to protect children, you have to assume that there will always be sexual abusers in the priesthood, despite your best efforts to screen them out. I will say more later about how you can better protect children from those who would prey on them, a problem not only in the church, but also in other high-risk institutions such as Big Brothers and Boy Scouts.

My husband, Dr. Eli Newberger, and I once consulted on a case of a pediatrician pedophile who offered his services to adolescents who had worries about their sexuality. Once he had them alone in his office, he masturbated the boys to ejaculation, and kept detailed records about each child. Does this mean that all pediatricians are pedophiles? Obviously not. It does mean that in order to protect children, a parent or a nurse should be in pediatricians' offices whenever they examine children (Newberger & Newberger, 1986).

We have to assume that pedophiles will be among us, and that we have to do what is necessary to make sure that they do not have opportunities to have access to children in order to exploit them.

Now let us think about what the world is like for children who have been abused by priests. In order to give you a sense of what the experience of victimization might be like for a child, I would like to tell you a hypothetical story. This story is about something I worry about every day, why I worry about it, and why it is important to worry about it. The story concerns Eli's and my grandson, Noah, who is five years old. Eli and I help take care of our two grandchildren, and often pick Noah up after his day in pre-kindergarten. I have recurring anxieties about being late. Noah knows when he comes out of his classroom that Baba and

Nana or Mommy or Daddy will be waiting for him. He lives in a world of safety, protection, and care, but he doesn't even think about being safe, protected, and cared for. It just happens. But what if, one day, Noah came out of the classroom and we were not there. What if he waited, and waited, and waited, and the teacher took him back into the classroom to wait some more after all the other children had been picked up, and still we didn't come. And what if we had had a flat tire and had been trying desperately to get there, but couldn't in time. And finally, one-half hour later, we rushed into the classroom and picked up Noah. This has never happened to Noah, but it is my recurrent worry.

If this were to happen, in that one-half hour Noah's whole worldview would have changed. It would have fundamentally, seismically shifted. Noah would no longer be innocently operating in a world in which he is safe, in which adults are predictably there, in which he is reliably picked up, nourished and protected. He would now be in a world where he cannot trust that when he gets out of that classroom, someone will be there. Such a seismic shift is what occurs when someone has been in a world in which he or she has been cared for, and all of a sudden discovers that bad things can happen in that good world. We are not referring to bad things like being punished for stealing cookies out of the cookie jar, but bad things in the very fabric of a child's sense of safety, the very fabric of the meaning of people and places in the child's life.

Such a seismic shift happens when children are sexually abused—by anyone. Their worldview changes, and it makes them untrusting, fearful, and anxious. It can take a long time to win back a child's trust, and trust never returns entirely. The child has learned something fundamental, which is that trustworthiness cannot be taken for granted. This represents a level of cognitive awareness that did not exist before the abuse. Now the child realizes, "Things can go wrong and I have to watch out" (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). Now these are lessons that everyone learns sooner or later, but you don't want children to learn them through trauma; you want them to learn them through appropriate, educative means.

Unlike the normal lessons children learn, and the lessons children learn from the trauma of natural disasters, sexual abuse comes wrapped in other layers of trauma. One is the layer of betrayal. Child sexual abuse is usually defined as sexual contact with someone five years or more older than the child, someone that a child would naturally assume would protect rather than harm (Finkelhor, 1979). Child abuse that takes place within the family is a particularly harmful betrayal, because it shatters the assumption that people who take care of them, who pur-

port to love them won't hurt them. Not only do sexually abused children learn that they can no longer trust that they will be predictably safe and protected, they also learn that people they rely on may actually intend to harm them (Freyd, 1998).

That childhood abuse can cause grave psychological harm is no longer doubted by professionals in the field (e.g., Ackerman, Newton, McPherson, Jones, & Dykman, 1998; Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1996; Collings, 1995; Jumper, 1995; Neumann, Houskamp, Pollock, & Briere, 1996; Newberger, & De Vos, 1988; Newberger & Gremy, in press; Newberger, Gtemy, Waternaux, & Newberger, 1993; Polusny & Follette, 1995). Recent research also reveals that childhood abuse changes the brain in ways that enduringly compromise emotional stability (Cromdie, 2003).

The church is also a place that takes care of people, where children experience and believe in the love of that church and its members for them, and by extension, the love of God for them. What is different about clergy abuse is that it shatters not only trust in the behavior and intentions of those who give care to children, but also trust in the systems of beliefs that give children a sense of meaning and community in their lives.

What are the effects of abuse by a priest? Levels of betrayals of that magnitude can make its victims feel and be pretty irrational. It can create in different people confusion, guilt, fear, intrusive dreams or recollections, jumpiness and irritability, difficulties concentrating, suspicions of the intentions of others, physical symptoms, feelings of worthlessness, and depression. If a person is vulnerable to unwanted and intrusive re-experiencing of the abuse, and his or her functioning is threatened by the disruptive symptoms that so frequently accompany trauma, that person is simultaneously going to try to avoid people, objects, and settings that will trigger those symptoms (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; March & Anaya-Jackson, 1993).

Many of you may have been puzzled by some victims' responses to being interviewed, for example, in church chanceries. Given what we have just discussed, if you put yourself in their shoes, you cannot assume that a setting in which you derive comfort and meaning is also going to be a setting in which they can feel comfortable, or even emotionally safe. And so, let us return to Archbishop Flynn's focus on putting yourself in the eyes of victims and the eyes of parents, who have experienced betrayal, too, through the church's abuse of their children. Those who would reach out to victims need continually to be monitoring and asking, "What would be best for you? We would like to reach out to you. Would you welcome that, or is that something you don't feel ready for

right now? Will you let me know if and when you feel ready? Would you like to speak with me? On what terms would that be most comfortable for you?"

Not just the church, but anyone who deals with victims that come from an environment in which people have been betrayed, needs always to be respectful of where they are coming from, and to understand that the loss of trust that is inherent in being victimized means that there may also be a loss of trust in what you hold most fundamental. That loss of trust must be respected, and perhaps at some future point that trust may be restored. But it will not re-emerge if you tell them what they should believe, how they should feel, or how they should behave. Trust can only re-emerge if you can show them that you can hear how trust for them has been breached.

I would like to end with a comment that I heard this morning from Father Dennis Tamburello. When Father Tamburello picked us up this morning, he told us that he has a prison ministry. Unbeknownst to him when he began this ministry, his predecessor was one of the priests accused of molesting children. As a consequence, the inmates did not trust Father Tamburello. They had not been abused themselves by the priest that he replaced, but their trust in Father Tamburello was shaken by the fact that they had trusted someone who was untrustworthy. Father Tamburello's response to the inmates was, "Well, I'll have to earn your trust."

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